In a recent article in *The New Yorker* magazine, neurologist Oliver Sachs writes about a man who lost his sight as a toddler but regained it through surgery at age fifty. When the bandages were unwrapped, the man did not leap from his hospital bed and exclaim "I can see," as one might imagine. Instead, he turned his head in confusion, unable to make sense of the shapes, colors, and light that his eyes took in. For forty-seven years, his had been a world of aural and tactile dimensions. Now, in order to see his wife, his dog, or the distance between two chairs, he would have to learn how to see from scratch.

To those of us who developed our eyesight as infants, the idea of learning to see may seem strange, for we take the mechanics of seeing for granted. Rarely are we called upon to question how or why we see as we do. Nor do we think about the limita-
tions of the human eye. Photographers, though, know that a camera’s vision is far better and more versatile than our own. For example, where we can only focus on one thing at a time, a camera can manipulate depth of focus or depict several objects in sharp detail simultaneously. It can shift perspective so that deep space appears to curl up and over our heads like a wave. It can stop action or up-end an ordinary scene through radical framing. In a photograph, out-of-focus areas are readable shapes, and light and shadows are solid forms.
Sights Unseen shows us how a variety of photographers have used the physics of photography and the optical properties of the camera to produce visions of the world that only the camera can see. Each picture was selected for the transformation that took place at the time of the exposure. No double-exposures or darkroom-manipulated images are included in the group. Among the photographers are artists, commercial portraitists, news reporters, and scientists. Like the man in Sachs’s article, all of them look upon the visual world with inquisitive eyes. Using the camera as a practical tool and an extension of the imagination, they give us sights unseen by the naked eye and a glimpse of the science and magic of photography.

Sights Unseen is the second in a series of exhibitions, called the “Photography Discovery Series,” funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, to explore the Art Institute’s photography collection from a thematic viewpoint. The exhibitions in the series do not originate as academic ideas. Instead, an ongoing review of the roughly twenty thousand photographs in the collection leads to the discovery of unknown strengths and thematic links in the museum’s holdings. Sights Unseen and subsequent exhibitions in the series will match little-known works with old favorites to provide a broad interpretation of the theme and a fresh look at the permanent collection.

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